

Scarboro Missions Interfaith Activities

Counting Interfaith Miracles

By Paul McKenna, SFM

I spend a lot of my time counting interfaith miracles. Let me explain what I mean. For some years now, I have been studying developments within the international, interfaith movement. I call these developments interfaith miracles.

However, keeping track of interfaith miracles in various parts of the world is, indeed, an impossible task. The God of all wonders is blessing the world with such an abundance of inter-religious miracles that no researcher can possibly keep on top of it. Even the Internet, with its thousands of interfaith web sites, cannot keep up with God's all-important business of unity and reconciliation.

Today we are witnessing levels of conversation and cooperation among the world faiths that are strikingly new to history. Our shrinking global village is now a multi-religious society.

I also spend a good deal of time counting interfaith miracles within the international Catholic community. But here again, the task is daunting. Who can keep abreast of the interfaith miracles that continue to abound within the global Catholic population?

Since the Second Vatican Council, an explosion of interfaith activity has reverberated across the global Catholic Church, and at all levels of the Church. Joining the Pope in this venture are bishops, and priests, parishes, lay people, theologians, teachers, social activists, monks, missionaries, religious orders, and many others.

In his encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II declares, "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice interfaith dialogue." The Church also invites us to study other religions and to commit ourselves to interracial, intercultural and inter-religious cooperation.

On January 24, 2002, the multifaith prayer summit held in Assisi, Italy is chief among the miracles. In the shadow of September 11, the Pope decided to bring the

religions together to pray for peace, just as he did in 1986. This interfaith pilgrim seems to be virtually unstoppable. In convening these

Assisi events, Pope John Paul managed to assemble two of the largest gatherings of religious leaders in history.

God continues to bless the interfaith work of Scarboro Missions. We, too, find ourselves being called into new, challenging and wonderful dimensions of interfaith cooperation. We are particularly encouraged by interfaith activity in our overseas mission. Our many inter-religious encounters are helping us to understand the Church's teaching that interfaith dialogue is a vital function of Christian mission.

We have every reason to believe that interfaith miracles will continue to abound around the globe. Unfortunately, inter-religious abuse will continue. Despite this, the interfaith impulse is alive and well. More and more people of various religions are joining the interfaith conversation. More and more people are experiencing this conversation as an occasion of faith. More and more people are seeing inter-religious sharing as a path to cooperative ethical action and harmonious community living. For this, we thank the Maker of all miracles.

PAUL MCKENNA, SFM, IS ASSOCIATE COORDINATOR OF THE SCARBORO MISSIONS INTERFAITH DESK AND TEACHES, WRITES AND CONSULTS IN THE FIELDS OF WORLD RELIGIONS AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE.

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Dialogue of Life

Encountering Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan

By John Carten, SFM

Often when inter-religious dialogue is mentioned, many people immediately conjure up images of deep and complicated theological discussion involving various religious experts—a dialogue in which only theological professionals can take part.

However, there is another aspect of inter-religious dialogue that takes place in the day-to-day interactions among people of various faith traditions. We call this a dialogue of life. This dialogue takes place not in meetings or assemblies but in the everyday encounters between peoples of good will. For the past 25 years, it has been my privilege to take part in this kind of dialogue in Japan.

When I first went to Japan, way back in 1972, I went with the deep desire to proclaim the Gospel to non-Christians, to those people who did not know God or had not heard of God. I thought that I was

bringing God to them, bringing God to a place where God was absent. But in Japan, my interaction with many profoundly good people of other religions has opened my eyes to the presence of the Spirit working far beyond the confines of the Catholic Church.

Shintoism and Buddhism are the major religions in Japan. Shintoism is the native or indigenous religion of the country and Buddhism arrived from China in the eighth century. Christians form less than one percent of the population and Catholics less than .05 percent

My encounter with Shintoism has opened my eyes in a new way. Shintoists see the presence of many gods in and through the beauty of nature. For example, near a waterfall in Japan, one will often find a small shrine that honors the god of the waterfall. Or, on top of a mountain, there will be a shrine to honor the god of the mountain.

Wherever nature displays its incredible beauty, one will find a shrine to honor the countless gods of nature. Shintoism has taught me to see God's intimate presence in nature—in the oceans, the mountains, and the forests.

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John Carten, SFM, in front of the Torii Gate at the entrance of the Hakone Shinto Shrine in Hakone National Park outside of Tokyo.

One of my favorite places is the mountaneous Hakone National Park, a two-hour drive from Tokyo. At the Hakone Shinto Shrine, one passes through the Torii Gate and begins a majestic walk through an avenue of soaring cedar trees. As people give honor to the gods of the mountains, I am likewise moved by the embrace of the Creator through nature’s beautiful spectacle of green. Indeed, Shintoism had challenged me to look more deeply at all of nature and feel God’s warm embrace there.

In Kamakura, where I first studied the Japanese language, there is a Buddhist temple called Hase Dera. Inside the temple, stands an imposing 10-metre statue of Hase Kannon, the goddess of mercy. The statue has many heads and many arms.

When I first saw this Buddhist figure, my reaction was, “What is this?!” A Buddhist friend explained to me the meaning of the many arms and hands—no matter how many people cry for help, Buddha always has an extra ear to hear their call, an extra arm to help them. What a tremendous expression of God’s compassion. Through encounters like this, I began to see how the Spirit of God has scattered pearls of wisdom and expressions of the Creator throughout many different religions. In our

openness to these traditions, we are privileged to taste another aspect of God’s beauty and truth.

However, for me it is the interpersonal relationships with people of other faiths that all of this is really felt. The goodness of the people and their openness to me has challenged me to be more open to the presence of God in persons of other faiths.

Let me give an example. For many years, I worked in Totsuka, Yokohama. One day, I decided to visit the Buddhist monk at a nearby temple. In time, he and I became good friends. Years later when our parish decided to build a new church, we realized that we needed the approval from the local municipal council. Without our asking him, my Buddhist friend approached the council and put his full support behind our application. His support left me wondering—Would I be open enough to speak out in favor of building a Buddhist temple in my native New Brunswick?

In planning celebrations for our first Christmas in the new church, we decided to cut some of our expenses. This included going without a Christmas tree. Two days before Christmas, my Buddhist monk friend donated a beautiful Christmas tree to our church.

When we celebrated our first Christmas, I made

“MODERN JAPAN OFFERS MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR A SERIOUS AND FRUITFUL INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE WITH THE FOLLOWERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS, ESPECIALLY SHINTOISM AND BUDDHISM. CATHOLICS MUST BE CONCERNED TO PROMOTE THIS DIALOGUE, BOTH BECAUSE WE ALL HAVE A COMMON ORIGIN AS GOD’S CHOSEN CREATURES AND A COMMON DESTINY IN GOD’S ETERNAL LOVE, AND BECAUSE THE CHURCH’S MISSION IS ONE OF SOLICITUDE FOR THE WHOLE HUMAN FAMILY, ESPECIALLY IN ITS SEARCH FOR TRUTH, HAPPINESS AND SOLIDARITY WITH ALL WHO SUFFER OR ARE IN WANT.”

Pope JohnPaul II to Catholic bishops of Japan, February, 25, 1995



In Kamakura, Visiting the Daibutsu, the Largest Outdoor Statue of the Buddha in Japan, John Carten, SFM, (far right) with his Longtime Friends, the Igimi Family, who are Buddhists. In the Center is Mrs. Fuse, who is a Parishioner at the Parish Served by Fr. Carten.

sure everyone in the congregation knew where this wonderful tree had come from. Here in Canada, how many of us would donate a symbolic religious gift to a mosque or temple in order that people of other faiths could celebrate their faith more festively?

In my last parish in Japan, I had a wonderful neighbour. He was 80 years old and not a Christian. Every morning at seven o'clock, he came over to the parish and swept the leaves from our church parking lot. And he refused to accept any money for this.

I could share many other such stories about my encounters with people of other faiths in Japan. In this dialogue of life, I find that I have much to learn from other faiths about goodness, generosity, compassion and the many different faces of the Creator God that Jesus came to reveal.

JOHN CARTEN, SFM, FIRST WENT TO JAPAN IN 1972 AND HAS SERVED MOST OF HIS PRIESTHOOD THERE. HE IS NOW IN CANADA TO SERVE AS COUNCILLOR ON SCARBORO MISSIONS' GENERAL COUNCIL

Scarboro Missions' Interfaith Desk on the Internet

To find out more about the interfaith work of Scarboro Missions, visit their web site at: www.scarboromissions.ca and click on **Interfaith Dialogue**.

Mission and Inter-religious Dialogue Web site

The Mission and Inter-religious Dialogue site of the Jesuits provides documentation on activities and ideas related to dialogue in Jesuit-related ministries in the United States. The web page also guides users to further Internet sites relevant to dialogue and the study of world religions. Go to:
<http://puffin.creighton.edu/jesuit/dialogue/>

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